DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 391 FL 025 823

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TITLE TESL: The Crucial Role of Formal and Explicit Instruction and Learners' Prior Knowledge--An Example in Learners of Chinese Background.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Classroom Techniques; Cognitive Development; *Communicative Competence (Languages); Contrastive Linguistics; Educational Research; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Language Patterns; Language Research; Language Usage; *Learning Processes; Learning Theories; *Prior Learning; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Sociocultural Patterns; Syntax; Tenses (Grammar); Verbs
IDENTIFIERS *Chinese People

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that formal and explicit instruction and learners' prior knowledge play a crucial role in teaching and learning English as a second language (ESL), and that a pure communicative approach is inadequate in achieving optimum results. The discussion is presented in two parts. The first outlines the issues under consideration, including distinctions between foreign language learning and second language acquisition and between the communicative approach to second language instruction and explicit language instruction. It also examines the importance of prior knowledge in the cognitive process and the role of the native language in second language learning, drawing on theory and research in these areas. The second part presents the example of ESL learners of Chinese cultural background, focusing on the role of cultural differences in language learning. Specific linguistic differences between Chinese and English are considered, including the use and construction of indirect expressions, linear vs. circular thinking patterns, differences in intonation, and differences in verb tense and time reference. Contains 24 references. (MSE)

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Previous publication with ERIC(Date:1997, No.ED413 790)**entitled:**

"The Difficulties and Challenges of Adopting the Communicative Approach in TEFL at Secondary Schools in Qinghai Province, China"

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Abstract

This paper argues that formal and explicit instruction and learners' prior knowledge play a crucial role in teaching and learning English as a second language and that a pure communicative approach is inadequate in achieving the optimum results. In so doing it draws support from theories of learning and cognitive development as well as research findings in second language acquisition. It then validates the argument using examples from the case of Chinese background learners.

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TESL: The Crucial Role of Formal and Explicit Instruction and Learners' Prior Knowledge - An Example in Learners of Chinese Background

Introduction

It is well documented in educational research that teaching and learning processes are closely linked in achieving educational outcomes(Biggs & Moore, 1993). Invariably, an effective teaching process is one that purposefully corresponds with the student's learning process. For example, highly recommended instructional procedures such as *scaffolds* "are only useful within the student's 'zone of proximal development'"(Vygotsky: 1978, as quoted in Rosenshine & Meister, 1992:26). An effective teacher is one who, besides having the knowledge in his/her curriculum area, also understands the learner's learning process and knows where the student's "zone of proximal development" is.

Moreover, constructivist views of learning point out that learning is "a process of knowledge construction which is driven by and based on the prior knowledge that people bring to any learning process"(Taylor, 1994:1). Learning of anything does not take place in a vacuum. The learner's prior knowledge influences his/her learning process. Therefore, to understand how the student learns and why s/he learns that way necessarily involves a need, on the part of the teacher, to know(to some extent, at least) the learner's prior knowledge.

This paper is firmly set in these theoretical frameworks and intends to, in Part I, argue through a review of research literature, that formal instruction and knowledge about learners are crucial in achieving optimum results in second language teaching and learning. In the second part, examples in Chinese background learners[1] are used to demonstrate this thesis. This argument is still necessary as a pure communicative approach is still strongly advocated in second language teaching.

As the language learner's age is one of the crucial factors in acquiring a second language, this paper will only focus on post pubescent and adult learners of ESL.

Part 1. Clarifying the Issues:

1.1 Foreign language learning(FLL), second language acquisition(SLA); communicative approach and formal instruction

FLL is about learning a foreign language in a usually monolingual environment where the target language is not spoken, such as learning English in China. For FLL, besides formal instructions

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. Although students of Chinese background usually speak different dialects, they share the same written script and cultural characteristics to be treated as one group.

on the form of the target language, the optimum context is recreating or emulating real-life situations in which the target language might be used. An linguistically-rich environment has to be created in the language classroom or institution which is usually the only place where information of the target language is given.

SLA is about learning a new language in an environment where the target language is spoken, such as overseas students or immigrants learning English in Australia. Already living in a linguistically rich environment, second language learners need explanations and formal instructions on the target language in order to unravel the language information encounters in their daily life. Their ultimate objective of learning English is for **professional** and **academic** purposes as well as for social **integration**. Thus the role of the second language teacher is necessarily different from that of the foreign language teacher.

Clearly, language courses that mainly use the "communicative approach" which provides language input to these learners communicative skills are not enough. In fact, research findings show a communicative approach which helps students accumulate useful vocabulary has "its potentially negative effect on their long-range aspirations"(Higgs & Clifford, 1982:73, quoted in Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988:6).

The communicative-approach advocators such as Krashen "assume that second-language (L-2) learning is very much like first language (L-1) acquisition"(Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988:1), as

> we acquire language by understanding messages, by obtaining **comprehensible input**. ... when acquirers obtain more comprehensible input, they acquire more of the target language(Krashen, 1992:409).

Krashen refers any formal instruction on language rules or form as inefficient, "peripheral and fragile". He believes what a second language teacher should do is "to supply large amounts of comprehensible input, both aural and written"(1993:725).

Although "no actual empirical studies have been conducted to prove that 'communicative' classrooms produce better language learners than the more traditional teacher-dominated classrooms"(Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988:1), this communicative approach has "met with enthusiasm" and has been adopted in the second language classroom for the last decade or so. Researchers and second language educators such as Celce-Murcia attribute this popularity to the fact that communicative approach is "intuitively very appealing"(1988:1).

However, the reality is that

> there is equally appealing and convincing evidence that a communicative approach can lead to the development of a broken, ungrammatical, pidginized form of the language beyond which students can never really progress. Such students are said to have 'fossilised' in their acquisition of the language(Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988:2)

Celce-Murcia and Hilles(1988:2-3) quote Higgs and Clifford's study(1982) at the Foreign Service Institute language Testing Unit of the U. S. government. At the unit, a proficiency exam (known as FSI) is used by foreign affairs agencies. According to the researchers, the FSI yields the best assessment of oral proficiency that they know of. Its rating scale encompasses a wide range of proficiency levels from 0 to 5. Level 1 indicates minimal communicative competence; Level 5 designates the speech of an educated native speaker. As a result of their experience at the Unit, Higgs and Clifford identify a student type which they call the "terminal 2/2+". This is a learner who cannot progress beyond the rating of 2 or 2+ on the FSI exam. Higgs and Clifford provide a profile of the "terminal 2/2+":

> This pattern of high vocabulary and low grammar is a classic profile of a terminal 2/2+... It is important to note that the grammar weakness that are typically found in this profile are **not *missing*** grammatical patterns, which the students could learn or acquire later on, but are ***fossilised*** incorrect patterns. Experience has shown again and again that such ***fossilised*** patterns are **not** remediable, even in intensive language training programs or additional in-country living experience. Hence the designation 2/2+ ... The data suggest that members of the group that have arrived at the 2/2+ level through street learning or through "communication first" programs are either unsuccessful at increasing their linguistic ability or tend to show improvement only in areas in which they had already shown high profiles... (67, 74, quoted in Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 3).

Here, the reason that the student who gets stuck at the 2/2+ level and cannot progress later even with intensive instructed training is that he/she is usually already a sophisticated user of his/her own pidginized communicative interlanguage. The terminal 2/2+ has "internalised" and formed his/her own version of the language. In fact, the learner has constructed a whole new linguistic system. To the learner, the system of his/her interlanguage may be a very sophisticated one; thus psychologically, his learning of the target language is completed. Therefore, to make real progress in the language would mean to deny the whole (inter)language system the learner has formed; he/she would then have to stop using it, unlearn it and start all over again. This time, however, the learner's prior linguistic knowledge would include his/her pidginized interlanguage as well, and the effect of that knowledge is more than likely to be negative. One can imagine how this would be an extremely difficult task. No wonder Higgs and Clifford have found it "not remediable".

People learn a foreign/second language for different purposes. The most efficient way to achieve survival level proficiency would be through a course that stresses vocabulary and communicative approach(Higgs & Clifford). For some learners, as Celce-Murcia and Hilles point out, a pidginized communicative interlanguage is completely sufficient for their social and vocational needs. Even in such cases, however, "students should be warned of the suspected effects of such a curriculum or approach"(Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988:6).

What is also problematic with the "communicative approach" lies in Krashen's statements about supplying large amount of comprehensible input in the second language classroom quoted previously. The implication of his statements seems to be that we acquire language by

accumulating information of the target language, by accumulating input. However, Rutherford(1987) uses the metaphor "organism" to describe language, which is to say that "the behaviour of the whole determines the parts"(Master, 1992:751). The learner needs explicit explanations in order to understand the whole general picture, or culture or system of the new "organism"(language). S/he would then (sub)consciously compare with his/her prior knowledge of what constitutes a language, and eventually internalise what the new language is.

Krashen's view that learning becomes acquisition only when the focus is not on form is in the centre of communicative approaches in language teaching and learning. A communicative approach supplying only comprehensible input seems to see language as a "machine"(Rutherford, 1987), which implies that language is the accumulation of different parts. Communicative approach provides separate entities / parts of the language system/organism. However, no matter how large the amount of input is supplied to the learner the input is still bits and pieces of the whole. It is quite easy for the different parts of that input to be disjointed. In this linguistic context, the learner is forced to draw, from discrete information on the language received in the communicative classroom, his/her own conclusions and pictures of what shape or linguistic system the target language takes. Thus the learner's own distinctive interlanguage is formed, usually heavily influenced by his/her first language. Advocators for the communicative approach often argue that aspects or rules that govern language use in natural setting such as the social and discursive functions cannot be explicitly taught. However, using Canale and Swain's words(1980, 5, quoted in Chen, 1990:158), these [social] "rules of language use would be useless without rules of grammar". Thus, without formal instruction on the form or rules that constitute and govern the new linguistic system, it is not difficult for second language learners to become "terminal 2/2+" linguistically.

In fact, as all second/foreign language teachers already know, learners usually expect explanations. Sharwood-Smith(quoted in Brindley, 1987:190) observes that,

> ...it is notoriously difficult to deny adult learners explicit information about the target language since their intellectual maturity as well as their previous teaching/learning experience makes them cry out for explanations(Sharwood-Smith, 1981:159-60).

Brindley(1987:190-91) supports this view by adding that,

> any teacher who deliberately refused to give an explanation would be violating a very basic principle of adult learning, that is, learners should have a choice concerning content and methods of learning. Secondly, even though low level learners do not produce certain structure correctly in spontaneous speech, they may still need to be made aware of how these structures are used, especially when the structures differ markedly from those of their L1.

Odlin(1990:111) also finds in his studies that individuals who are in classes where explicit knowledge is often presented will likely know more about language than will individuals acquiring a second language in informal contexts that involve little Foreign Language Learning.

The linguist Gee (1991:5-6) draws on concepts of "acquisition" and "learning" (Krashen, 1982, 1985; Krashen & Terrel, 1983) and defines that

> *Learning* is a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching, ...[which] involves explanation and analysis, that is, breaking down the thing to be learned into this analytic parts. It inherently involves attaining, along with the matter being taught, some degree of meta-knowledge about that matter.

In short, explicit explanations of the target language system are crucial to "consciousness-raising"(Rutherford, 1987) in the learning processes of second language learners. Formal instruction is essential for learners to obtain that explanation.

1.2 The cognitive process: the importance of prior knowledge

Constructivist views of learning reveal that learning of anything including a second language does not take place in a vacuum. "Learning is influenced by what a person already knows"(Yates & Chandler, 1991:141). In fact, the effect of prior knowledge is quite powerful, as Yates and Chandler(1991) observe

> Once a learner's attention is secured, the impact of existing knowledge on learning will often outweigh factors such as incentive, cognitive style, locus of control, personality or attributional dispositions(141).
>
> There are three known conditions under which prior knowledge can interfere with the individual's acquisition of new knowledge: namely, memory interference effects, misconception effects, and know-it-all effects(143).

Leinhardt(1992:21-22) shares the same view,

> Prior knowledge dramatically influences the processing of new information. It affects how students make sense of instruction both in a facilitative sense and in a dysfunctional sense.
>
> Knowledge is a complex network of ideas, facts, principles, actions, and scenes: therefore, prior knowledge is more than a building block of information. It can facilitate, inhibit, or transform a common learning task.

Of the three "interfering" conditions, the misconception effects are probably the most prominent in second language learning. As the learner needs to constantly analyse new constructs of the target language and draws conclusions in order to learn them, it is crucial that s/he is guided in the process because "when a learner approaches a new topic with faulty beliefs or knowledge based on misinformation, any new information is likely to be interpreted in terms of the initial misconceptions"(Yates & Chandler, 1991:143). Thus it's probably true to conclude that those learners who are dubbed "terminal 2/2+" are partly victims of their own misconceptions due to lack of guidance in the learning process.

Rutherford(1987:7-8) is most insightful on prior knowledge in second language learning as he analyses how the second language learning takes place,

> [what every L2 learner] brings to this initial language-learning task is a kind of prior knowledge of two different sorts. One sort we might describe as `knowledge that' - an unconscious `foreknowledge' or innate `inkling' of what shapes the organisation of the target language can assume - and the capacity, given a little start in the new language, to make good guesses about what he *doesn't* know. The other sort we will call `knowledge how'- the ability temporarily to bend the new language into forms that will, with maximal efficiency, serve the initial desire for rudimentary communication, an ability that the learner retains from the similar experience of having acquired his mother tongue. Both of these cognitive capacities are crucial, for without them no language learning would be possible at all. Thus, the task of learning another language may be a formidable one, but what the learner already `knows' about language in general, and also about how to use a language for any of its various social and cognitive functions, renders it an eminently *possible* one.

Naturally, this prior knowledge manifests itself in some way through what the learner attempts to produce in his new language from the earliest stages of learning. Rutherford(p.8) observes "one pervasive characteristic of early interlanguage that is designed perhaps to render the target language optimally learnable. It is the tendency to let the relationship between form and meaning be as direct as possible." The efforts on the part of the learner to construct his own distinctive interlanguage are "in reality, of course, nothing more than the simple consequence of the learner's need to make early communication in the new language intelligible to himself"(p.8). Therefore, word-order transfer from L1 to L2 is inevitable in the early stages of L2 learning.

1.3 Native-language help

According to Harbord(1992:350), "the idea of avoiding the mother tongue in language teaching dates from the turn of the century, with the appearance of the direct method". The direct method is the extreme of the communicative approach addressed previously in this paper as problematic.

With more second language researchers and educators finding the communicative approach disputable, there is a return to emphasising the role of formal instruction and "consciousness-raising on L2 rules and forms"(Rutherford, 1987; Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988). With this development comes a new recognition of the role of the learner's L1 in the L2 classroom. As Harbord(1992:351) advocates Danchev's(1982) justification for the use of L1,

> ...translation/transfer is a natural phenomenon and an inevitable part of second language acquisition even where no formal classroom learning occurs. Learners will inevitably (and even unconsciously) attempt to equate a target language structure or lexical item with its closest or most common correlate in their mother

tongue, regardless of whether the teacher offers or `permits' translation.
...therefore, methodology should attempt to work with this natural tendency rather than against it.

Brindley(1987:192) makes this point explicit by stating that if low level ESL learners requested explanation, provision would have to be made for the use of their first language since it is unlikely that complex grammatical explanation could be conveyed adequately in English.

However, this is not a call for extensive L1 use, rather a justification for its limited use for certain situations. In any case, methodology of teaching should be there to facilitate learning, so is the use of L1 in the learning of L2.

Harbord lists the strategies (for using L1) "which are principally communication facilitative"(1992:352):

Group A
* Discussion of classroom methodology during the early stages of a course.
* Explaining the meaning of a grammatical item (e.g. a verb tense) at the time of presentation, especially when a correlate structure does not exist in L1.
* Giving instructions for a task to be carried out by the students.
* Asking or giving administrative information such as timetable changes, etc., or allowing students to ask or answer these in L1.
* Checking comprehension of a listening or reading text.

Group B
* Explaining the meaning of a word by translation.
* Checking comprehension of structure, e.g., `How do you say "I've been waiting for ten minutes" in L1?
* Allowing or inviting students to give a translation of a word as a comprehension check.
* Eliciting vocabulary by giving the L1 equivalent.

Group C
* L1 explanation by students to peers who have not understood.
* Giving individual help to a weaker student, e.g., during individual or pair work.
* Student-student comparison or discussion of work done.

This is a rather comprehensive list which builds a strong case for the use of L1 in the learning of L2. Naturally, it is up to the individual teacher and the level of her students as to how much of L1 is used.

Harbord(1992:354) also points out that the advantages of such activities as asking students to compare or discuss their work are "so great that at lower levels it will be more beneficial to allow students to do this thoroughly in L1 than to do it tokenistically in L2 or not at all". Duff(1989) recommends the use of exercises involving the translation of single words or phrases *in context*

(1989:51). Translation within a specific context makes the students more fully aware of the problem of single word translation. The object here is not to save time, but to use it effectively to help students to understand that what works in their mother tongue may not work in English.

Therefore, the argument is not whether L1 should be used in the learning of L2, but rather how it should be used. It is useful to quote Harbord's(1992:355) paraphrasing of Duff(1989),

> L1 should be used to provoke discussion and speculation, to develop clarity and flexibility of thinking, and to help us increase our own and our students' awareness of the inevitable interaction between the mother tongue and the target language that occurs during any type of language acquisition.

Thus an effective L2 teacher is one who makes an effort to learn about the L2 learners, their native language and cultural background.

Part II. An example in the Case of Chinese Background Learners

For the influence of the prior knowledge, the Chinese learner of ESL is no exception. S/he goes through the same procedure in which s/he constructs an interlanguage that makes sense to him/herself, and that s/he can analyse as a new language on the basis of his/her mother tongue - Chinese. His interlanguage will necessarily take a distinctive Chinese style with characteristics of the Chinese language. To guide and facilitate his learning effectively, the ESL teacher should, to some extent at least, understand the learner's interlanguage, and be able to identify the characteristics of the learner's first language in his production.

As Hing(1993:38) aptly points out, "the difficulty in learning a foreign language lies not just in the language itself but also in the influence of the learners' own culture, especially in their world views, values and thought patterns". Students learning a new language need to be made aware of the cultural differences in order to unravel the linguistic difference. Explicit explanations by the teacher of the differences often help.

Chinese culture is different from the cultures of the English speaking communities. The thinking patterns of the Chinese are different from those of English speaking people. As language is the manifestation of our thought patterns, this difference is naturally reflected in the linguistic performance and the learning process of the Chinese ESL learner. To understand these differences is to understand how the students learn and why they learn or perform the way they do. This understanding is crucial to effective instruction, feedback and correction on the part of the teacher.

2.1 Cultural differences lead to linguistic differences

To illustrate the above point, I shall use a few examples. In Chinese communities, the community, the communal group, the clan / family are far more valued and regarded than the individual. Therefore, reflected in the language, descriptions in Chinese move from the general to

the specific, from the common to the unique, and from the whole to the individual and smaller units(Hing, 1993; Hwa, 1989). In English, it is just the reverse. For example, in English, the first name of each person comes first, while in Chinese, the family name comes first. Another example can be found in the structure of addresses,

English: Jane Smith,
Apt. 8, Australian Embassy Residence,
Liberation Lane,
Revolution Road, Xichen District,
Beijing, China

Chinese: China, Beijing,
Xichen District, Revolution Road,
Liberation Lane,
Australian Embassy Residence, Apt. 8,
Smith Jane

This logic / structure in the Chinese way of thinking extends to descriptions of time order and spatial arrangement as well. In English, "5:30am, Wednesday, 25th May 1994" has exactly the opposite time order in Chinese. The English description "the gold nugget hidden in the box in the drawer of the table beside my bed in the master bedroom of grandma's house in Sydney", if put into Chinese, will keep the listener waiting for a while before you hear the core words "gold nugget" as they come at the very end of the description. In Chinese, the modifying and the context come first.

2.2 Indirect expressions

Related to the above point is the indirect expressions perpetuated by Confucian traditions and the teaching of "hide your brilliance and never outshine others"(Hing:1993). Showing off is decidedly a vice. This teaching from a young age may contribute to some Chinese learners' seemingly diffident manners such as tentativeness and being reticent in the language class(Hing, 1993). The diffident manner is, in this case, a culturally modified behaviour.

A linguistic example of this point can be found in the responses to the tag questions. To the question "You are not going out today, are you?", the English speaker would answer according to the actual fact or reality. That is, if he is going out, he would answer "yes"; or otherwise "no". In Chinese, however, the listener's focus of attention is on the speaker(the person who asks the question). Thus if he answers **"yes"** to the above question, he means that the speaker is right, and that he is **not** going out. To the Chinese person, you value and respect the person who is speaking to you. Hence the reality merely serves as a reference to the speaker who is the focus.

2.3 Linear vs circular thinking patterns

Hing(1993) observes that the thought pattern of English speakers is often described as linear in nature. Much factual English writing is therefore characterised by a linearly developed sequence. Preciseness and succinctness are most encouraged and valued in English writing. In contrast, Chinese writing is often characterised by an indirect approach with modifying expressions which would be deemed excessive in English. The development of a paragraph is like turning around a gyre or circle. "The circles turn around the main subject and present it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is never straightforwardly stated"(Wang and Earle 1972:668). Traditionally, flourishing rhetorical decorations are highly regarded. This writing style is often transferred by Chinese students into their writings in English.

Field (1994:125) has found that "student writers in Hong Kong have a distinctive style in ordering their thoughts for academic essay assignments which consists of **frequent prefacing** of their points with cohesive conjunctions". She finds that these students overuse and misuse conjunctions. This conjunctive style is full of additive devices such as "longish, ponderous words which add weight to the beginning of a sentence"(Field, 1994:128). Studies done by Norment(1984) and Arndt(1990) point to evidence in the Chinese context that writers transfer the organisational style they have developed in Chinese to their writing in English.

2.4 Tones and intonation - the phonetic differences

Chinese is a tonal language while English is an intonational one. With the exceptions of "n" and "ng", Chinese characters/words all end with vowel sounds. This difference usually causes two problems for learners of ESL. The first is the tendency of beginning learners to add a vowel sound to English words that end in consonants, as in "rid**eh** a bik**eh**" and "you are a good**eh** cook**eh**, Mrs. Grant**eh**".

Another problem is that beginning learners usually miss the consonants in listening, such as "live" and "lived" may sound the same to the learners as they, from their experience with Chinese, do not expect a half-pronounced [d] at the end of a word. Learners may skip the unexpected sound subconsciously. As Gass finds out in her research,

> ...while the amount of information a learner receives outside the classroom may in fact be greater than what a learner receives in a classroom, it may also be the case that the information may be **unusable** for language development.

Brindley(1987:180) also laments that "beginning learners mainly use the present simple or that they do not use verb tenses at all".

My point here is that these phonetic differences are very difficult to pick up for beginning learners. Therefore, explicit explanation and formal practice are needed to draw the learners' attention.

2.5 Verb tenses and time reference

While verb tenses are an integral part of the English language, the Chinese language does not have verb tenses. My experience as a Chinese speaking ESL student and language teacher is that verb tenses, together with the time reference, are the most difficult part for the Chinese learners.

In Chinese, time reference is marked by adverbs such as "yesterday", "this morning", etc., and by implicit and contextual assumptions. There is one particle to mark tense in Chinese, but the verb itself never changes form. Thus, "speakers of Chinese may be faced with establishing an entirely new hypothesis of how time is used and referred to"(Guiora, 1983, quoted in Hinkel, 1992:558).

Because the whole concept is non-existent in Chinese, explicit explanation is fundamental to the unravelling of the system of the verb tenses and time reference in English. Let's take the following dialogue between Linda and John for example,

> L.: Are you watching TV? ... Have you watered the garden?
> J.: Yeah, [I've] done it.

Without instruction on the structures of present perfect tense "have done", the learner may not be able to grasp what it means even if he knows all the vocabulary. He will find out that the words "have" and "done" alone do not have anything to do with watering the garden. Verb tenses(together with concepts of time reference) dwell within a **system**. The system is best presented through explicit explanation in L1 to the learner(Hinkel:1992).

Conclusion

Research findings show that second language learning is different from first language acquisition, and it necessarily involves much formal explicit instruction and explanation (to the learner) on the system of the target language. A pure communicative approach is inadequate in teaching and learning English as a second language. Therefore, second language teachers should be equipped with metacognitive-skills in explaining the target language.

Moreover, the cognitive process of second language learning shows that the learner's prior knowledge plays a fundamental role. in order for teaching to correspond the learning process, L2 teachers are also recommended to have a good understanding of the learner's first language and his/her cultural background in order to effectively facilitate the learner.

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